

Answer Man Dispenses A Dram of Md. History

By John Kelly
Sunday, September 17, 2006; C02

Who was this Hungerford guy and why is there a one-mile stretch of Route 355 in Montgomery County dedicated to him?

-- Eric Myers, Rockville

Answer Man likes to think that Hungerford Drive celebrates the notion that some of the best ideas come while under the influence of alcohol, or at least while at a place where alcohol is served. Ideas such as the American Revolution, for example.

Hungerford Drive is named after *Charles Hungerford*, but it really honors the business that Hungerford happened to be running in 1774. That business was Hungerford's Tavern, an inn conveniently located on the road between what at the time were two of Maryland's main population centers: Georgetown and Frederick.

When patriots from what was then southern Frederick County wanted to discuss the depredations of the British, they chose Hungerford's Tavern as a meeting place. On June 11, 1774, they voted to boycott trade with Great Britain. In 1776, they voted to carve two new counties out of Frederick, naming them after patriots *George Washington* and *Richard Montgomery*.

Charles Hungerford probably didn't own the tavern, and by 1777 he was out of the picture, and a man named *Leonard Davis* was running things. The tavern did double duty as a courthouse. Cases were heard there until 1779, when a real courthouse opened nearby.

The tavern was the epicenter of what is now Rockville. In fact, for a while the hamlet was called Hungerford's. Then it was called Montgomery Courthouse, reflecting the judicial building. A man named *William Prather Williams* purchased land near the courthouse, surveyed it and decided it was best to name the town after himself: Williamsburg. That didn't stick either. There was a proposal to call the village Wattsville, after Watts Branch, which ran nearby. By 1803, they'd fixed on Rockville, in honor of Rock Creek.

(Answer Man shudders to think how close we came to hearing R.E.M. sing, "Don't go back to Wattsville and waste another year.")

The tavern itself was a modest structure, a story-and-a-half tall, with dormer windows set into the sloping roof. It was originally made of logs, though over time those were framed in. It had four main rooms and a back room with a dirt floor. Next door was a smaller house for the tavern keeper and his family.

Washington and Gen. *Edward Braddock* (of French and Indian War fame) are said to have stopped at the tavern. A 1911 article from The Washington Post reported that *Thomas Jefferson* stopped at Hungerford's, "and several times he met *Patrick Henry* there." The *Marquis de Lafayette* supposedly set a while there, as did President *Andrew Jackson* and Gen. *Robert E. Lee*.

All we're missing are *Bigfoot*, *Elvis* and *John Foster Dulles*. (Answer Man thinks the writer may have exaggerated some.)

If any of these people were to go back to Rockville and find the tavern, they'd have a tough time. One reason: No one is quite sure where it was. Most people think it stood at South Jefferson and Washington streets, but archaeological work there hasn't provided the expected results: not enough broken wine bottles and clay pipes. Barring the discovery of a pewter beer mug engraved with "Property of Hungerford's Tavern," the exact location may never be known.

The structure that probably was the tavern -- and that by the early 20th century was called Russell House -- was demolished in 1913 to make way for a Baptist church and parsonage. Talk about a buzzkill.

Hungerford didn't get honored in asphalt until the 1950s, when what was known as the Rockville Bypass was constructed. It took traffic out of downtown Rockville and sent it east. Hungerford Drive is the connective tissue joining Rockville Pike and Frederick Road.

If you go to the tavern site today, you'll see a plaque next to a BB&T bank. It's right next to a 24-hour bail bond service, suggesting that downtown Rockville hasn't really changed that much.